

KIRTLANDIA®

The Cleveland Museum of Natural History

March 1997

Number 50:21-24

PRESENTATION OF THE DAVID S. INGALLS, JR. AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE*

PRESENTATION OF THE AWARD

MIRIAM SMEAD

*Trustee, The Cleveland Museum of Natural History
1 Wade Oval Drive, University Circle
Cleveland, Ohio 44106-1767*

Tonight we have gathered to present the fourth David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence. It is awarded to an individual for excellence in research, education, or conservation in one of the fields of natural science represented by The Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Dr. Roger Conant, our honoree, has become a giant of national and international prominence in all three of these areas and his remarkable contributions to herpetology and the zoo community span seven decades.

Born in Mamaroneck, New York on May 6, 1909, his zoological career began in Ohio. In 1929 he was appointed to the position of Curator of Reptiles at the Toledo Zoo, from which he was promoted four years later to General Curator. Those years spent, in part, researching Ohio's herpetology resulted in the publication of his first book, *Reptiles of Ohio*, in 1938. It soon became a landmark in the field of herpetology, with its innovative spot-mapping technique that related species distributions to the habitats in which they were recorded.

In 1935 he returned to the East and accepted the position of Curator of Reptiles at the Philadelphia Zoological Garden. During his association there he wrote and presented a weekly radio program entitled, "Let's Visit the Zoo" that

began in 1936 and was aired for over 33 years. Also, under his guidance the Philadelphia Zoo was involved in some of the earliest captive breeding programs. His concern for the proper management of captive animals stimulated research and addressed critical issues of conservation. In 1967 he was appointed Director of the Philadelphia Zoo, a position which he held until his retirement in 1973.

Through his books he has attracted countless young people to the delights of studying and identifying reptiles and amphibians. In the late 1950s he prepared the Boy Scouts of America Merit Badge Pamphlet on Reptile Study. Since then over 200,000 young boys have earned that merit badge. Hundreds of thousands of others have learned more about reptiles by using that pamphlet. The strong influence of Dr. Conant's presence and research in Ohio resulted in the formation of the Ohio Herpetology Society. This later grew into the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles, now the largest herpetological society in the world.

Perhaps the publication for which he is best known is his *Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America*, in the Peterson Field Guide Series. First published in 1958, it has gone through three editions. This handbook has had a great impact in stimulating interest

*On June 1, 1996, the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence was presented to Roger Conant. A slightly shortened version of Miriam Smead's speech on that occasion is printed here. Roger Conant's remarks are excerpted from his acceptance speech.

and educating people in the field of herpetology. In Roger Tory Peterson's letter of endorsement for this award, he wrote, "He (Conant) has done more than anyone else to enhance our knowledge of reptiles and amphibians in the United States."

Collaborating with the late Howard K. Gloyd, former Director of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the book *Snakes of the Agkistrodon Complex*, was published in 1990. It is a monograph on the genus *Agkistrodon*, which includes the copperhead and its relatives worldwide. Our honoree has authored over 200 scientific papers, representing research, not only in North America, but in Latin America and Asia as well. He has been the recipient of many awards and recognitions.

Spanning seven decades of research, his books have brought the world of reptiles into the homes of innumerable readers. He has been a highly respected spokesman for greater public understanding of this often misunderstood group of animals. Through faithful correspondence he has been a strong influence in the lives of budding naturalists. Countless herpetologists and naturalists today write with great admiration and genuine fondness for this man who has been their mentor and friend.

Dr. Conant, we salute you and all of the accomplishments of your 87 years. Your efforts and accomplishments embody the very principles of this Museum's mission. On behalf of the Board of Trustees of The Cleveland Museum of Natural History, I am highly honored to present you the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence.



Roger Conant, June 1, 1996

REPLY

ROGER CONANT

*Department of Biology
University of New Mexico
6900 Las Animas NE
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110*

Thank you Dr. Taylor, Mrs. Smead, and all of you for being here, and especially for this award. Accepting it is certainly one of the highlights of my career and especially in my old age, if I may put it that way. However, I am overawed by the company with which I find myself: the distinguished scholars Steven Jay Gould and Edward O. Wilson; and Roger Tory Peterson, whom I have known for over forty years. And here I am, a self-taught naturalist, among them. I feel highly honored indeed by the presentation of this award and by the recognition that goes with it.

I fancy myself as a humble interpreter of natural history and of zoo management and zoo animals, especially for young people. I have received a lot of letters from youngsters, and I have tried to answer all of them. One of them surfaced just this very evening—a letter I wrote back in 1970 to a then teenager. He cherished that letter and I am happy to see that he still has it.

I have gotten a lot of letters that read something like this: "Dear Mr. Conant, I have just found a snake that is an eighth of an inch longer than the maximum size that you give in your field guide. How do I go about putting this wonderful discovery on record?" I wrote back nice letters to them. I didn't tell them that snakes stretch and that they should be measured when they are relaxed. That would have taken all of the fun out of it for them. My extensive files and my mailing log indicate that during my lifetime I have written more than 15,000 letters, chiefly to young people, trying to answer their questions no matter how trivial. Usually I can do them off the top of my head, but I will admit there have been times when I had to do a lot of research to answer their questions. But I persevered and wrote to them anyhow.

During my tenure as Director of the Philadelphia Zoo, and in fact even before that, when I was in a subordinate position, I always found time to help budding young people. Often a teenager would arrive with one or both parents who were anxious to know whether it was possible for the young person to earn a living in herpetology. Unhappily, in those days, I had to tell them that the answer was "no." There were very few opportunities in herpetology. If they were terribly enthusiastic, I suggested that they keep it as an avocation, but perhaps try to become a member of the faculty of a college or university and to use herpetology as their research

subject. Some of them did that, but most of the young people were just crestfallen.

It is very good for me to be back in Ohio. I've enjoyed every minute I've been here, and I have seen quite a little bit of this part of the state in the last few days. I became an employee of the Toledo Zoo in 1929. President Herbert Hoover and I started on the same day. I lasted a little longer than he did. I was there until 1935 and then I went back to Philadelphia, which was more or less my hometown. I had grown up and gone to school there. I enjoyed my work in Toledo very much. We were pioneering. Things happened there during the great depression that made the Toledo Zoo a world-class institution, which it certainly is today under the dynamic leadership of Bill Denner.

While I was in Toledo those six years I attempted to make a survey of the reptiles of Ohio. With my boon companions, young people in their teens, I traveled all over Ohio. We managed to do field work in 87 of the 88 counties. One of the places where we looked hard and long was the Pymatuning region. It was then the Pymatuning Swamp. In the 1930s it was being clear-cut in order to create the Pymatuning Reservoir. On the Pennsylvania side my colleagues had found the wood turtle and the bog turtle, neither of which had ever turned up in Ohio. Of course, we were very anxious to get over there and find one or both of those to add to the fauna of Ohio. Unfortunately, we never succeeded, but we tried year after year.

Nowadays it is possible to enter the Ohio turnpike near Toledo, drive to near Warren and then more or less diagonally upward to the northeastern corner of the state which is close to the Pymatuning. You can do that today in the matter of just a very few hours, but no such luxury existed back in the 1930s. The main road paralleled Lake Erie and went through every small town close to the lake, down the main street just as it had in horse and buggy days. So it took us a frightfully long time to get from Toledo to Cleveland. Our personal refueling stop in Cleveland was Childs' Restaurant which may now be long gone, but then it was open all night. We would go there and stuff ourselves with pancakes, sausages, scrambled eggs, donuts and cups of coffee, and then promptly go to sleep—except for the driver. Finally, after going

through an endless stream of suburbs on the eastern side of Cleveland we would emerge about dawn and see the milkman with his horse-drawn cart delivering milk to the houses. I'm sorry to say that in those days we thought of Cleveland as a horrible bottleneck to get through, and that was why we did it in the wee hours of the morning when there was little traffic.

I got back to Cleveland a number of times in the daylight and discovered it was a wonderful city. I was here many times. I went through the reptile collection at the old Museum of Natural History building and looked at all of the material, but there was not much of it. Of course, that building has long since disappeared. I came to know the zoo,

which was then a collection of barred cages and a monkey mountain. I have been able to look at your new building, this beautiful natural history museum, and my wife and I also spent a day at the zoo. What changes have taken place in the sixty years since I left Toledo. Certainly after tonight I will never forget Cleveland.

This wonderful honor which you have bestowed on me is an event that I'll remember always, and it is certainly a highlight of my long career. I extend my deepest thanks to all of you who had a part in it, those who supported me, to the trustees of the Museum, to Mary Taylor, and to Ray Novotny who was the catalyst who put it in motion. Thank you all for coming.